

MARCH 14, 1974

Signs of the hard times have hit the Shortgrass Country. An old boy was by the ranch wanting permission to run a metal detector around the shearing corrals. Conditions are desperate when treasure hunters are interested in what herders or shearers lose. For my money, I'd as soon stake a claim in a hobo jungle.

In the past 50 years, the National Hummingbird Assn. couldn't have lived off what was dropped at shearing operations. Sheep peelers and sheep owners combined couldn't have staked a May Queen to a small bouquet. Things must be desperate for anyone to want to pick up after us. I am not going to town until I catch up on the news.

March is a good month to do spot mining in the Shortgrass Country. Some of the more solvent members of the community still believe that Caesar will overlook the tax money they bury in their front yards or hide under the kitchen floor.

It's the old pirate's philosophy of using a hole for a safety deposit box, instead of an inlet that might pop up in front of a tax agent's microscope. Strict interpreters of the tax law would probably define the act as tax evasion. Right cranky judges, I'd think, would gavel out quite a number of years in the pokey for following the habit. However, from the view of citizens who have learned to survive in depression and drouth combinations, it is more related to the way bears hibernate than it is committing a criminal act.

In the evenings, coming home from work, I notice a number of home gardeners who normally limit their heavy digging to moving dust under domino tables with their boot heel, showing a marked interest in moving dirt and carving "X's" on their shade trees.

They are easy to spot. As a car nears, they grab up a leaf rake or a shovel and take a petunia farmer's stance. Once the car is gone, they return to salting the earth with whatever they are hiding.

The only one I ever caught red-handed happened one time when I was picking up some club lambs for the county agent. He was out under a pecan tree, using one of those mechanical nut pickers as a prop.

Little Bo Peep could have told he was guilty. He just blurted out that he couldn't ask me in for coffee as his wife was busy refiguring their income tax return.

I wanted to ask him how many tomato cans full of cash he was deducting from his yard, but he was already so nervous that he needed to be left alone.

Knockout drops would have been the best he could have offered me. Coffee won't destroy your memory. Folks who go around poking in tax cases are apt to find themselves in a very hard witness chair in front of a very tough federal judge. What I would have enjoyed most was a fast getaway car with no license plates. Of course his tax return had to be redone. Squirrels can't start to count their nuts if the den has a hole in it. I'd have paid double taxes to forget the whole scene.

It sure is disconcerting to think that people are willing to prospect around shearing corrals. Hombres grow mighty wild when they are broke. I am watching those claims over in town. With the right kind of lease, a man might work out a real good deal.